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SUBJECT: SPLM TO PROCEED WITH DARFUR INITIATIVE

KHARTOUM 00001509 001.2 OF 002

SPLM Forging Ahead with Darfur Initiative

¶1. (SBU) Despite the failure of recent overtures to Darfur rebel leader Abdulwahid al Nur, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) intends to proceed with an initiative in the next 10 days to prepare Darfur's rebel groups for negotiations scheduled to begin in Libya at the end of October, according to UN officials in Khartoum. The initiative will focus on political reconciliation among the rebel factions of the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), followed by capacity building workshops.

Rebel Participation Still in Question

¶2. (SBU) While acknowledging that the SPLM may face difficulties in garnering wide rebel participation at meeting in Southern Sudan, UN and AU officials in Khartoum emphasize that they remain supportive of an SPLM role in the Darfur peace process. In addition to Abdulwahid, Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) leader Khalil Ibrahim has rejected SPLM invitations to Southern Sudan. As a result, the SPLM has begun discussions with breakaway JEM commander Abdullah Banda and JEM Secretary General Bahar Abu Gharda in lieu of Ibrahim. The SPLM has been unable to make contact with SLM/Unity commander Abdullah Yehia. (Note: In a conversation with Poloff on September 25, SLM leader and Senior Assistant to the President Minni Minawi reported that he had spoken to Abu Gharda and Banda that day and had convinced them both to agree to a cease-fire and to attend the Libya negotiations. End note.)

¶3. (SBU) First Vice President Salva Kiir has planned a tour of the ten Northern states--including Darfur--within the next month. SPLM Deputy Secretary General for the Northern Sector Yassir Arman has been proposing such a trip since early 2007 as a confidence building measure with Darfurians, many of whom remember the SPLM's opposition to certain power and wealth-sharing proposals during the negotiations for the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA). While Government of Southern Sudan Vice President Riek Machar has led the SPLM's Darfur initiative as of late, UN officials now speculate that Kiir's decision to visit Darfur--coming after Arman's recent return to Sudan--may indicate that Arman has assumed control of the Darfur portfolio.

Opportunity for S/E Natsios

14. (SBU) Remarking on S/E Natsios' upcoming visit to Sudan, the UN point person for the SPLM suggested that the Special Envoy could deliver three critical messages to senior Southern officials: 1) Emphasize continued coordination and cooperation between the UN/AU and the SPLM, 2) Urge the SPLM to "conceptualize" its role in the Libya negotiations, given that it is a member of the Government of National Unity but not a signatory to the DPA, and 3) Discuss the SPLM's positions on power and wealth sharing issues of concern to the rebel movements and gauge the SPLM's flexibility on these issues.

Comment

15. (SBU) The SPLM can play a constructive role in preparing Darfur's rebel movements for negotiations--though they will need to draw on outside expertise to be successful and may need to consider holding a meeting outside Southern Sudan in order to garner inclusive attendance. The U.S. should work to ensure that the SPLM initiative is consistent with the broader framework of the Darfur political process and should re-focus attention on drawing out the SPLM's positions on issues. S/E Natsios' visit to Sudan will provide an opportunity to jump start efforts on both fronts. In the absence of greater SLM unity so its factions can agree on a platform and more in-depth discussion with the SPLM on its redlines, the National Congress Party (NCP) is under no pressure to tip its hand and engage in preparatory discussions with the UN/AU that could lay the foundation for success in Libya. End comment.

KHARTOUM 00001509 002.2 OF 002

16. (U) Tripoli minimize considered.
FERNANDEZ